

Do not worship idols

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A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church in the morning service by Henry Dixon on 22nd January 2006

You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Exodus 20:4-6)

Introduction

These verses contain the second of the Ten Commandments. In a nutshell this commandment says that that we must not make and worship idols. This follows inevitably from the first commandment, which is “You shall have no other gods before me.” If the God of the Bible is the one we are to put above all other gods, then we must not make other gods for ourselves and worship them.

I want to consider this commandment under three headings:

1. What is forbidden by this commandment?
2. Why is it forbidden?
3. What will God do to idolaters?

1. What is forbidden by this commandment

Before we consider what *is* forbidden, I want us to consider what is *not* forbidden. This commandment does not in itself forbid all art, photographs or

movies which reproduce things in this world. Some Moslems interpret this commandment as a ban upon all physical representation of anything in creation. According to this view, all films and TV programs, all art (apart from geometrical patterns), and all photographs are sinful. However, even in his instructions for the building of the tabernacle God gave instructions about how the craftsmen were to make various objects which resembled things in creation (for example in Exodus 25.34). So this commandment should not be seen as a blanket ban on all art, photographs and movies *per se*. There might be other reasons why we would not want to look at some art, or watch certain movies, or watch TV, but this commandment by itself does not give reason for a total ban on such things.

What, then, *does* this commandment forbid? Here are some things which it forbids:

- Worshipping God with images. "You shall not make yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above." Some depict God as an old man with a beard and bow down to such an image. We are not to do this. Some people create in their minds a view of God which is different from the God of the Bible. They say things like this "My idea of God would not send people to Hell. My idea of God is that he forgives everyone." If you speak like this you are breaking this commandment. You have created your own mental idea of God. You are worshipping a figment of your imagination, an idol.

- Equally forbidden is the worship of Jesus using crucifixes or other statues or pictures. People who pray towards crucifixes or statues of Jesus say that the crucifixes and statues are an aid to devotion to Christ. They say that they do not actually worship the wood or stone that they are made of. However, use of such images is totally forbidden by this commandment, because no image or statue can properly represent Christ. He is now in heaven, in dazzling glory. Moreover, although those who bow down to such images say that they are not worshipping wood or stone, in reality it is to physical objects that they pray or bow. Therefore praying to crucifixes, statues or pictures of Jesus is forbidden by this command. What about pictures, plays or films depicting Jesus, not produced with a view to worshipping him, but with a view to teaching the Bible? Some Christians would say that these can be helpful. The problem is that no man can properly convey Jesus' glory. John says "We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1.14). No mere man can convey the glory of Christ, who is God become flesh. Therefore I believe that this

commandment would rule out such attempts to represent Christ, however well intentioned.

- If the worship of God the Father and Christ using statues is forbidden by this commandment, how much more is the worship of Mary or the "saints". Mary and the "saints" were simply sinful human beings, some of them saved by God's grace, but still sinners who have died. They have no power to hear or answer prayer. We should not pray to them or worship them, or any statue depicting them. Neither should we pray to relics associated with them or Christ, such as the claimed "bone of St. Peter", or claimed fragments of the Cross, or the claimed shroud of Christ at Turin.

- Equally outlawed is the worship of all pagan idols, such as statues of elephants, eagles, lizards, and so on, or the worship of the sun or moon or stars, or the worship of ancestors. "You shall not make for yourself an idol in form of anything in heaven above, or on the earth beneath or in the waters below."

Of course in our own secular "post modern" culture, there is little interest by many in religious idols and statues. But we should not think by this that there is no idolatry. Far from it! It is just that today's idols are secular idols. Here are some of them:

- Pleasure. The desire for pleasure is the dominating factor for many in our society. Everything is geared to this one thing: maximising the pleasure and fun you can get from things in this world. There is actually nothing new about this. Paul says about those who opposed the Gospel that "their god is their stomach" (Philippians 3.19)

- A close cousin of pleasure is greed. This is the compulsion to have more and more things, even when you cannot afford them. Paul says that we are to get rid of greed "which is idolatry" (Colossians 3.5)

- Then there is the secular idol of status in the world. Some, particularly men, will give anything to become famous, to make a name for themselves, to have a position, to become the top of the ladder in their career. They will sacrifice their time, pleasure, even their family to this idol.

- Then there is the idol wanting people to think well of us. This is a really subtle temptation for us who are Christians. We think we are serving God,

giving time and money for his cause, preaching, visiting, praying, and studying his Word. Yet why are we doing these things? Is it, partly at least, because we wish others to think well of us, like the Pharisees did? If so, then we are really serving an idol rather than the living God.

– Then there are what could be called the media idols. The politicians, sports heroes, pop stars, movie actors, as well as their Christian equivalent: great preachers, Christian musicians, healers and so on. If you are devoted to such individuals, then you are idolising them.

– Maybe your idol is very close to you: your husband or wife, girlfriend or boyfriend or children, or a family member who has passed away, but who still dominates your whole life. Love for family members is good and right, but family members must not take the foremost place in our hearts. This belongs to God alone.

So we see that idolatry takes many different forms. We should not think that just because we are not guilty of one form of idolatry that we are not guilty of it in another form.

2. Why it is wrong to worship idols

We now consider our second question, namely “Why is it wrong to worship idols?” There are a number of things that can be said in answer to this.

1) Because idolatry misrepresents God.

Remember who it is who is speaking: Jehovah God. The God who says, “I am who I am”; the One who is eternal, invisible, sovereign and majestic; who lives in unapproachable light; who is full of glory, perfectly holy, righteous and true; who knows all things.

If you to represent God in any form this diminishes his glory. Sometimes people justify idolatry by saying that they are using idols to help them to worship God. But the “God” that you worship with such helps is not the God of the Bible, but some pale and weak imitation. Because the true God is invisible he cannot be represented in any physical format. Listen to what Moses says later on, as recorded in Deuteronomy 4.15 – 20.

You saw no form of any kind the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of

the fire. Therefore watch yourselves very carefully, so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman, or like any animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air, or like any creature that moves along the ground or any fish in the waters below. And when you look up to the sky and see the sun, the moon and the stars – all the heavenly array – do not be enticed into bowing down to them and worshiping things the LORD your God has apportioned to all the nations under heaven. But as for you, the LORD took you and brought you out of the iron-smelting furnace, out of Egypt, to be the people of his inheritance, as you now are.

Do you see what Moses is saying? The God you worship is an invisible God. He is spirit. Therefore he is not to be worshipped with any image.

2) Because it is giving glory to objects to which it does not belong.

The second reason why idolatry is wrong is because it entails giving glory and honour to created things, rather than to the living God, the creator of all things. God says, "I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols" (Isaiah 42.8).

The essence of idolatry is this: a sinful refusal to worship our Creator, the God of the Bible, and instead switching the love and devotion that should go to God to other things. The apostle Paul describes this in Romans chapter 1 verses 21 – 23:

For although they knew God [from his creation], they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

This is the heart of man's rebellion against God, and it is the fount of all other sin, as Paul makes clear in the rest of Romans chapter 1.

3) Because it is a spiritual form of adultery

The third reason why idolatry is wrong is that, for those who are in a covenant relationship with God, idolatry is spiritual adultery. Remember what God said, "I am the LORD your God". God had entered into covenant with the people. He was their God and they were his people. He was a "husband" to them in spiritual

terms. Therefore what he wanted from them in return was faithful love and obedience. If that love was turned to idols it was a form of adultery and prostitution, which would arouse God's jealousy. Hence he says in verse 5, "You shall not bow down and worship them, for I the LORD your God, am a jealous God." He is rightly jealous, as a husband is rightly jealous for his wife.

So when Israel turned away from the LORD to idols, as far as God was concerned that was adultery. God says to Jeremiah, "Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up on every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed adultery there" (Jeremiah 3.6).

God has done the same for us who are believers. He has entered into a better covenant with us than the one he made with Israel, with far better promises. He has "married" us. Christ is our bridegroom. The church is the bride. In return he wants the exclusive devotion of our hearts. If we turn away from him to idols, we are committing idolatry. James says, "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the Spirit he caused to live in us longs jealously" (James 4.4 – 5, alternative footnote translation of the NIV).

3. What God will do to idolaters?

The third question is, what will God do to idolaters? The answer is that he will punish them. "I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me."

This immediately raises the question, "Why does God here say that he punishes children for the sins of their parents?" To answer this you have to understand the nature of the Old Covenant which is the original context for this commandment. When God entered into covenant with Abraham he did so with Abraham and his offspring. Hence all the males in Abraham's household were circumcised. This aspect of the covenant with Abraham continued in the covenant that God made with Israel in the desert. Hence if a person committed idolatry he was abandoning the worship of God. He was breaking the covenant. Therefore he was putting himself *and his children* outside of the covenant.

The New Covenant that God has now brought in is explicitly different from the

old on this point. Whereas the Old Covenant was made between God and the Israelites and their children, God promised that under the New Covenant things will be different. He said in Jeremiah 31.29 – 30, the passage immediately before the passage promising the New Covenant.

In those days people will no longer say, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' Instead, everyone will die for his own sin; whoever eats sour grapes-- his own teeth will be set on edge. "The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.....

Does this mean that God no longer minds if people commit idolatry. Far from it! There is still punishment for idolatry. But now each man individually bears the punishment for his own sin. And this punishment is not upon a man and his children in this life, but upon the man himself for all eternity if he does not repent.

The Bible is very clear about this.

For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person — such a man is an *idolater* — *has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient (Ephesians 5.5 – 6)*

And again,

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor *idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9 – 10).*

If you practice idolatry and continue to do so without repentance, there is only one place where you will go: Hell. I say this not on the basis of my own ideas, but on the basis of what God has said in his Word. I would be a false witness if I did not warn you that this is what God teaches.

Is there any way out? Yes there is. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, including those guilty of idolatry. He was punished in the place of sinners. If you trust in him and what he did on the Cross, then all your sin will be taken away, and you will receive forgiveness and eternal life.

What should we do?

Are you a Christian? Have you been born again? If you have not been born again you are inevitably an idolater, in one form or another, and you are heading for the wrath of God. What should you do? Repent of sin. Come to Christ. Seek him for forgiveness. Ask to him give you the Holy Spirit and make you to be born again.

If you are a Christian, examine yourself. Are idols lurking in your heart? Ezekiel had a vision of men secretly worshipping idols in the temple (Ezekiel 8.16). Are you a secret idolater? You are known as a Christian, but secretly, on the quiet, you are bowing down to your pet idols? What is your idol? greed for possessions? food? desire for people to approve of you? your family?

What should you do? Here are some suggestions for you if you are a believer, to help you not to fall into idolatry:

- Remember the weakness of idols. If we only remembered that idols are helpless man made gods, our hearts would not be drawn to them.
- Do not do anything to feed idolatry. Be careful about which television programmes you watch, if you watch any at all. Be careful not to spend hours reading magazines or visiting internet sites which might feed covetous desires.
- Do not form close alliances with unbelievers. Do not marry an unbeliever. In the Old Testament this was, again and again, the way in which the people were led into idolatry: through marrying unbelievers. If you marry an unbeliever it is almost inevitable that you will land up worshipping the idols of your spouse.
- Meditate on God's greatness, and all that he has done. Think about his attributes. Remember how he gave his Son to die for your sins.
- Ask to be filled with the Holy Spirit. We need a constant supply of fresh grace from the Lord to reignite our heart's affection for him. Go to him. Seek him afresh for a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit into you life, that you might properly love him.

Unless otherwise stated, Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible,

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